DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 248 921 JC 840 514

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TITLE Team Learning in Large Classes.
PUB DATE 30 Mar 84
NOTE 4p.; From "Team Learning in Large Classes," by Larry K. Michaelsen, in: New Directions for Teaching and Learning; Number 4. San Francisco, Jossey-Bass Inc., Publishers, 1983, p13-22.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Viewpoints (120) -- Collected Works - Serials (022)
JOURNAL CIT Innovation Abstracts; v6 n10 Mar 1984

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Group Activities; Group Discussion; *Grouping (Instructional Purposes); *Large Group Instruction; Postsecondary Education; Team Training
IDENTIFIERS *Team Learning

ABSTRACT

Information and suggestions are provided on the use of team learning in large college classes. Introductory material discusses the negative cycle of student-teacher interaction that may be provoked by large classes, and the use of permanent, heterogeneous, six- or seven-member student learning groups as the central focus of class activity as a method of breaking this cycle. The next sections briefly examine the formation of groups; the sequence of instructional activities (i.e., individual study followed by individual exam, then group discussion and exam, lecture, and application-oriented activities); the organization of course material so that each topic provides a conceptual framework for the next; and the development and management of group-oriented classroom activities such as tests, problems, case analyses, and role plays. After commenting on the importance of ensuring sufficient space and time for group work, the paper discusses two methods of providing feedback and handling student challenges. The final section summarizes the results of team learning in large classes, focusing on the in-class and out-of-class benefits for students and instructors. Benefits for students are seen in their active involvement in the learning process, the provision of immediate feedback, ready access to individual help, and the opportunity to work on challenging problems. (LAL)

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ED248921

INNOVATION ABSTRACTS VOL. VI NO. 10

Published by the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development
With support from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation

TEAM LEARNING IN LARGE CLASSES

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JC 840 514

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For further information, contact the author.

Suanne D. Roueche, Editor
March 30, 1984, VOL. VI, NO. 10

INNOVATION ABSTRACTS is a publication of the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development, EDB 348, The University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Texas 78712, (512) 471-7545. Subscriptions are available to nonconsortium members for $35 per year. Funding in part by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation and the Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education. Issued weekly when classes are in session during fall and spring terms and bimonthly during summer months.

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ISSN 0199-106X

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TEAM LEARNING IN LARGE CLASSES

Although large classes generally reduce instructional costs, they often provoke a negative chain reaction among student and teachers. Students are forced to be passive; this passivity produces apathy, absenteeism, and poor performance. Instructors often blame themselves, not the class structure, and search for ways to improve their delivery skills in order to recapture student's interest. When these efforts fail, instructors blame unappreciative and irresponsible students. The budding conflict can escalate if instructors use grades to force students into at least a minimum level of activity. Unfortunately, this cycle often ends in a sort of armed truce that satisfies neither side.

Team learning is an instructional format that breaks this destructive cycle through extensive classroom use of permanent, heterogenerous, six-or seven-member student learning groups. Team learning involves students actively in the learning process. The work of team learning groups is the central focus of class activity, not a temporary supplement to lectures or laboratory sessions. Consequently, the teams can harness group forces in ways that short-term groups cannot. Indeed, permanent groups become cohesive enough to serve as a major source of motivation and social support. As a result, attendance in team learning classes is exceptionally high, and the percentage of students who drop out is often quite low.

Forming Groups

The team learning process is most effective when groups contain members with a wide variety of viewpoints and at least one member with the specific skills required for completion of assigned tasks. Since pre-existing friendships between individual members can impede the development of group cohesiveness, instructors should form the team learning groups, relying on an inventory of students' backgrounds and competencies to identify an appropriate skills mix.

Sequencing Instruction Activities

Most group-oriented instructional approaches follow the traditional instructional activity sequence of lecture and individual study, followed by application, followed by an exam. In this traditional sequence, exams do not provide the concepts that ought to be learned in class; as well, students will often put off studying until just before an exam.

In team learning, the primary instructional activity is different. Individual study is followed by individual exam, then group discussion and exam, lecture, and finally application. This sequence enhances learning in a number of ways: it places primary responsibility for learning the material on individual students in individual study, then on the group and the instructor; students receive immediate feedback on how well they have learned through scoring of individual exams and discussion during the group exam; the sequence provides a forum for peer teaching through discussion during the group exam and later application-oriented activities, projects, and exams; it provides the instructor with specific information on concepts about which additional information is needed and reduces the coverage of material that students already understand; it provides groups with information about each individual's level of preparation; it shows students and the instructor that groups can teach their members. Finally, it ensures that students will develop a working familiarity with course concepts before application-oriented activities, projects, and exams.

Organizing the Material

Since testing precedes lectures in the team learning instructional activities, topics must be sequenced so that each provides a conceptual foundation for the next. Tests must be devised that allow the instructor to detect and correct misunderstandings before the next topic in the sequence is introduced; as well, course material must be divided into relatively small units in order for the instructor to monitor student understanding.

Developing and Managing Group-Oriented Classroom Activities

Activities that have been successfully adapted for the team learning process include tests, problems, case analyses, and role plays. However, any group task must be carefully structured so that students understand the kind of "product" the group is to produce; and the task must be sufficiently challenging if information is required from a majority of group members. Tests should measure each group's effectiveness in pooling informa-

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tion; on group tests, the instructor should specify the form in which answers are to be given, and the questions asked should be difficult enough that they are likely to be missed by students working alone but to be answered correctly by a group after discussion.

Many application-oriented activities, including minitests and experiential exercises, require written materials to be distributed at a certain point. Without careful planning, the time required in large classes to distribute materials or collect assignments can be prohibitive. To solve this problem, a teacher can use manila folders containing the materials that each group will need on any given day. Groups can collect their folders at the beginning of the class.

A similar method can be used to collect materials. For example, the teacher can establish the rule that individual assignments must be placed in a designated folder. Thus, all materials are received in a standard-sized, clearly labeled form. The folders can also provide an effective means of controlling materials; e.g., if a check of folders indicates that six exams were handed out to a project team and only five exams were returned, the group can be asked to find the missing test. (Groups always do.)

Groups must be paced so that the teacher can work with the class as a whole. Three methods can help the instructor coordinate the groups' work: each group can produce materials that can be shared with the entire class; group activities can be scheduled near the end of the class period so that students can leave when they complete their work; the five-five rule can be applied (when five groups--or 25 percent of the class--have completed their activities, all other groups have five more minutes in which to turn in their answer sheets or other assigned work).

The Classroom and Schedule

Team learning requires a room in which group work can be done in reasonable comfort and in which students' group affiliations are easy to identify. The ideal classroom permits seating in a circle or at a large table. Team learning works better in large classes that meet for at least seventy-five minutes. As Bloom suggests, problem-solving discussions take a while to become productive, particularly when they are intended to develop analysis and synthesis skills.

Providing Feedback and Handling Student Challenges

There are two methods for handling disagreements while giving feedback on group tests. For preinstructional exams, groups can prepare written appeals on questions that they miss. If an appeal is accepted, it can also apply to the individual exams. Appeals are instructionally helpful: in the process of reviewing assigned readings to prepare an appeal, students often discover that they, not the instructor, were mistaken; writing the appeal reduces the need to let off steam; the students and the instructor can respond more rationally, since the actual decision on the appeal is delayed until a later time; the appeals can be used to improve the questions.

With essay exams, the teacher can provide feedback by temporarily reforming the groups to discuss an "ideal" answer provided by the instruction--either a reproduction of the best answer obtained from groups in the class or a composite of the best answers. In most cases, discussions within groups can resolve misunderstandings, since the majority of group members usually understand the "ideal" answer. As a result, confrontations seldom occur, and later class discussions focus on additional perspectives.

Results of Team Learning in Large Classes

In sum, students benefit from team learning in important ways: they are actively involved in the learning process, they receive immediate feedback, they have ready access to individual help, and they have an opportunity to work on challenging problems. Other benefits extend beyond the classroom: team learning groups foster friendship and social support, they provide information about coping with the demands of the university bureaucracy, and they give students an opportunity to develop interpersonal and group skills.

The use of team learning also enriches the experience for instructors. The team learning process so increases the frequency and candor of student feedback that, even in large classes, teaching is a very personal experience. As well, the team learning process allows instructors to meet demands to teach larger classes without feeling guilty about the learning that takes place there.

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